

I Am Empty, I Am Timeless

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by [acchae anum](#)

Summary

Buck and Bucky meet again, in a different universe. Only this time, they're simply John and Gale. Nothing more, nothing less.

Notes

Third time's a charm, apparently. Back at it with another fic regarding the Buckys.

Well, I'm basing this one on an AU idea I found on TikTok by the user @louisemyat. Saw it, thought it was interesting, decided to write it. I made a few changes of course (mainly because I have this version of who these two are in my head that I can't change) but kept it similar. I've never written an AU before, but there's a first time for everything, right?

Anyway, enjoy this one! I hope I'll be able to update regularly, of course.

Thanks for reading!

-author (who is genuinely tweaking)

PS: Title is a line from the Song "Submarines" by Zia Cora on Spotify. Do check it out, it's awesome!

Chapter 1

John sighed as he opened the door to the bar that he usually frequented after long days. The familiar scent of liquor and cigarette smoke immediately penetrated his sense of smell, while his eyes quickly adjusted to the low lighting in the room. John liked this bar. A lot, actually. Maybe the fact that it wasn't too sought after by the younger folk and more of a hidden gem in the back alleys of Richmond's busy streets made it so precious to him. Besides, the bartender was a rather nice guy who was willing to put up with John's constant talking. Hell, he had even accepted the nickname John had given him. John liked giving nicknames, to most people's dismay.

As was to be expected on a work night, there wasn't too much going on in the bar this late into the evening. Now, to be fair, 11 p.m. wasn't exactly bedtime, but most of the other regulars had to get up early in the morning, so getting wasted wasn't really on their schedule. However, John Egan wasn't like most other regulars. He had one purpose tonight: getting drunk beyond recognition.

A quick look around the room gave him the sense of comfort he had been looking for all day. The tables were mostly empty, only a few men still lingering and chatting in hushed voices, smoke concealing their features. The majority of the yellow-tinted light bulbs that gave the bar its old-school charm weren't lit, meaning it was almost closing time. During the week-ends, it would be crowded with people at this time. John would know, he had spent too many nights here cramped between bodies, head spinning and smile wide as can be.

But that was not tonight. It was just him and the bottom of the bottle tonight.

John took a seat on one of the red barstools, placing both hands on the counter and strumming his fingers against the wood, humming a tune. The man across the counter, who had been busy cleaning glasses, turned to look at him. Robert Rosenthal, "Rosie", as John came to call him (he REALLY liked giving nicknames), greeted him with a small smile and folded his cleaning cloth neatly, fully converting his attention to John. His dark curls, similar to John's, were neatly combed back, orderly and precise. John's were all over the place, as always.

“Egan!,” Robert began, smile unwavering, “I was expecting you.”

John simply smirked back. “Course you were, Rosie. What can I say, I’m a man of routine.”

Robert raised an eyebrow at the nickname before continuing his friendly demeanour. “It’s good to have you. The usual?”

“You know me too well.”

Robert turned his back to him and poured him an Old Fashioned (with bourbon, of course). There was no drink that tasted quite as good as this one, John liked to think. He had of course tried them all, but he always came back to the bittersweet flavour mingled with the sweetness of a freshly cut orange. Robert placed the glass filled with the slightly peachy liquor in front of him with a knowing look reflecting in his eyes.

“It’s one of those nights, isn’t it?”

John kept his smirk plastered to his lips. And they say bartenders know all your secrets. Well, apparently, they were right. “That’s right,” John nodded.

Robert returned to his cleaning duties without another word. John took the first sip from his glass and revelled in the slight stinging of his tongue and the coolness travelling down his throat. The night had officially begun.

Three drinks later and John’s vision was starting to blur. Not so much that he couldn’t walk or talk anymore, but enough to make him feel good about himself. Which was a rare occurrence without alcohol. Except for him and Robert, there were maybe only five other people left in the bar, minding their own business. Which John was very grateful for since this was essentially his me-time and he wasn’t really in the mood for conversation right now. This however, would soon change.

John had just ordered his fourth drink, suffering a disappointed look from Robert (he was a bartender! You’d think he knew better than to judge his customers), when the small bell attached to the door dinged,

indicating a new arrival. John had heard that sound too many times to count, so he didn't pay any mind to it. Not even when the seat two chairs over from his own was being claimed.

John stared into his liquor. He watched the ice melt, glistening in the low light. There was a tingling running up his spine, and he was certain it wasn't alcohol-induced.

"What can I get for you?"

"Just a water, please."

Only when that voice rang out in the bar, low and determined, did John look up and turn his head to the left. He ignored the sharp pain in his chest. He had to stop smoking so much. But it wasn't his smoking habit that knocked the air from his lungs when he laid his eyes on the man two seats over.

Golden hair slicked back, only a few strands escaping their confinement, a light stubble framing a sharp jawline and travelling up smooth skin. John knew he was staring, but hell, could you blame him? Gorgeous didn't even come close to describing this man's appearance. His eyes were a deep blue, focused intensely on Robert, as he poured him a simple, plain, boring glass of water.

Then, the man turned his head and for a moment there was nothingness. John couldn't even register his own heartbeat anymore. The only thing that was left in the world was him and this man. The unyielding waves of the ocean clashing with the broken earth of the shore.

There was something so familiar about him, but John couldn't quite pinpoint it. Had he seen this man before? Yeah, maybe in some modelling magazine.

But of course, John had to destroy their little moment by doing what he did best. Talking. "Well, you sure look like you've had a rough day." Without fully registering what he was doing and if it would come across as intrusive, John found himself sitting next to the man with the golden hair. John wanted to run his fingers through it. Now

THAT would be intrusive.

The man nodded. "You could say that." There was a southern drawl to his voice that made John want to drown in it. If there was a solution to John's drinking problem, it would be this man's voice.

"Then why exactly aren't you ordering something stronger than a glass of water?" John cocked his head to the side, impatient for an answer.

Robert interrupted John's exceptional conversation skills. "Don't influence my customers, Egan. Not everyone looks to alcohol for a solution to their problems."

John teasingly dismissed him with a wave of his hand, unable to tear his eyes away from the man next to him, who, to John's surprise, didn't spare Robert even a glance. After a pause that seemed to last for hours, he finally answered. "I don't drink."

John felt as though those eyes could see right through all of his schemes and lies; as if he was utterly naked in front of him. It was scary, but thrilling. So, instead of backing off and leaving things as they were, John decided to engage further. Because, when did he ever make decisions that weren't reckless?

"So what's your name?," he asked, emptying his fourth drink in one go. Drinking up courage like a giddy school boy, he thought. John watched eagerly as the man slowly brought his own glass to his lips and took a sip, blue eyes still trained directly on John's.

"Gale," the man replied, "Gale Cleven."

Yep, John had definitely heard that name before. He just couldn't recall where he had heard it. Or maybe it was the alcohol messing with his memories. He allowed himself to let his eyes wander; he'd been so transfixed by the man's, Gale's face, that he hadn't even looked at the rest of him. Gale was wearing a simple black suit, not a wrinkle to be seen, the tie loosened only a little, exposing pale collarbones. He was lean, too, John noticed. His hands looked soft and delicate and John had to refrain from interlacing them with his own. God, what was this, some shitty romcom?

“Gale Clevon,” John mumbled, returning his gaze to Gale’s eyes. The name slipped so easily from his lips, he felt as though he had said it a hundred times before. There was no sign of discomfort from being so obviously checked out by another man in Gale’s features, which John only took as another invite to go further.

He straightened his back and held out a hand. “Well, it’s a pleasure to be meeting you, Gale Clevon!” Gale took his hand and shook it in a firm grip. The touch sent a lightning strike of tingling all over John’s body. So his hands were soft after all. John never wanted to let go.

“John Egan, at your service.” John gave a short bow, relishing in the fact that it earned him a huffed chuckle from Gale Clevon.

So there John was, his usual bar, ten minutes past midnight, completely swooning over a guy he had literally just met. He was so screwed. Even more than normally. Which said a lot for John Egan.

He would be able to feel sorry for himself later. Right now, he simply enjoyed his new found company, forgetting the troubles of his life. Who could ask for more?

John left the bar that night with only four drinks in his system and a new number saved to his contacts.

Chapter 2

Usually, it was the alcohol that led John Egan to Robert's bar. Now, he wasn't so sure anymore. He was rather excited too, nervous even. Which, to be honest, made him feel a tiny bit stupid but really, who was he to deny a second meeting with a certain blonde boy?

So, once again, John found himself sipping on his drink, observing his surroundings attentively. There were several more people in the bar than last time, maybe because the week-end was drawing near and spirits were higher than in the middle of the week. The chatter of the people around him made John relax in his seat, knowing that he was in a controlled and safe environment, and there was absolutely no need to be nervous.

Except there was.

Because when Gale Cleven walked through that damn door, all dolled up in his neat suit, terribly handsome, John audibly gulped. Gale's eyes immediately found him and he strode over, taking a seat next to him, adjusting his tie in the process. John had to blink twice, hard, to not be distracted by Gale's hands. Can a man not admire another man's beauty in the most simple way of all?

John found his voice after five very long seconds. "How do you still look like that after a day at work?," he asked, already regretting the words as soon as they left his mouth. Gale gave him a raised eyebrow and a blank stare. "What do you mean?"

John pressed his lips together and sucked in a breath. "You're messing with me," he pointed at Robert, who had been watching their interaction from behind the counter, and back at Gale, "he's messing with me."

Robert threw his hands up in defence and lowered his head, a smile pulling at his lips. "I am not going to be a part of this conversation."

John turned to Gale, studying him with narrowed eyes, drinking in the slight grin that looked so familiar. "What do you work as, anyway?"

Gale ignored him for a moment, nodding towards Robert instead. "Could I get a glass of water?"

Then, he answered, a tiny hint of reluctance mirrored in his words. "I'm a lawyer."

John almost burst out laughing, but he stifled his amusement to a mere chuckle. Why did a handsome guy with such a fancy job decide to come to the most smoked in bar in all of Richmond? As far as John was aware, Gale didn't even drink, let alone smoke. It was utterly ridiculous, really. "Could've guessed that." He glanced at Gale's suit.

He must have looked a mess next to Gale Cleven, actually. John couldn't remember the last time he had put on an actual blazer. Or combed his hair. To wear, he usually picked whatever was the first thing that fell out of his closet when he woke up in the morning. Which mostly consisted of a plain t-shirt, too wide jeans, and a pair of dirty (they were simply very well loved) sneakers.

"So, what do lawyers do for fun?," John asked, an eyebrow raised.

"Go to bars to drink water."

John had to laugh at that. Hey, at least Gale was self-aware. He had barely composed himself when Gale shot the question back at him. "What do you do for fun?"

"Go to bars to drink alcohol," John answered, feeling a bit too much like a smart-ass. "YOu can ask Rosie. Says he knows everything about me." He glanced toward his bartender, whose ears perked up at the mention of his (nick-) name.

Gale looked confused. "Rosie?"

Robert trotted over and placed both hands on the counter, strumming his fingers, a rag thrown over his shoulder. The typical bartender stance. "Egan likes to give nicknames, that I can tell you," he remarked, "and probably much more, since he likes to talk my ear off whenever he's drunk." Robert looked like a condescending parent, scolding their child. John grinned up at him, sipping his drink. He noticed Gale's confusion turning into amusement and decided to play along. Keeping his new-found friend entertained got him going.

"Oh come on, you probably don't even know my middle name," John

teased, resting his chin in the palm of his right hand, putting on a fake disappointed look. Noone knew his middle name. That was a secret he wasn't willing to tell. He found it was a rather stupid sounding name.

Robert sighed. "That's a trick question. You don't have a middle name."

John was about to answer, revelling in his victory, but Gale cut him off.

"Clarence."

What. His eyes widened and he slowly turned his head towards Gale, who looked equally as surprised. Well, maybe a little less, since John felt as though his eyeballs were about to pop out of his skull. How on earth could he possibly know about that? It took him a while to find his voice again, his throat dry.

"How did you-" John couldn't even finish his question, the disbelief still too near.

Gale shrugged. "Lucky guess." There was the tingling again, coating every inch of John's body. Maybe Gale had a side job as a clairvoyant.

At that moment, a sparkling light at the edge of his vision caught John's eye. It directed his gaze to Gale's hand, clasping his glass of water. More importantly, his ring finger. His ring finger... with a ring on it. Of course. Gale had a well-paying job, was good looking, and a nice guy. Why wouldn't he be married? The ring looked expensive too, a white sapphire shining in the centre of it. How had John not noticed it when they had first met? In his defence, he was probably too sloshed to notice anything smaller than the ice cubes in his drink.

Gale soon realised what John was staring at (for way too long) and spread out his hand, examining the ring himself. God, John really liked his hands.

John cleared his throat after a beat of silence. "You're married?"

"Engaged." Right. A ring didn't necessarily mean that the wedding had already taken place. John could imagine Gale's fiancée, a clear image of her popping up in his mind's eye. Blonde hair, slightly curled

to perfection, diamond blue eyes, red lips and shiny high-heels to top it all off. She probably had an old-fashioned name too, something like Margret or similar. John already despised her. But could he blame her? He, too, would want to marry this man without hesitation. No questions asked.

“When’s the wedding?”

Gale was still looking at his ring, a soft smile on his lips. He really loved this woman. “In two months.”

John nodded, slowly. Robert, who had been listening to the conversation the whole time, spoke up, the joy evident in his voice. “Congratulations! What’s her name?”

Gale finally lifted his head, looking at John, a twinkle of mischief reflected in his icy eyes. “Marge,” he mumbled, his voice low and sultry.

John forced a grin. “Marge,” he repeated teasingly, dragging out the ‘a’ while shaking his head. Gale was in love and John was cursed. When was it his turn to be loved? Nevertheless, he barked out a laugh at Gale’s annoyed expression and clapped his back in a friendly manner. No use sulking over it.

So, John sucked it up and the night went on like this, teasing and light-hearted banter filling their conversation topics with laughter and grins on both sides. John was sure that at some point, Gale had called him “a stone in his shoe” to which he had responded with: “but one of those you would take out and display on your shelf.”

It was bizarre how ebay they clicked. Knowing each other for one day and already getting along as if they had been friends for years wasn’t something a lot of people could say about themselves. And it made John feel special. Because it was him that Gale had chosen, after all. Gale’s fiancée (who turned out to look exactly like John had imagined her, very pretty) would never know him like John did. What they had was special. A bond of familiarity you couldn’t explain. John felt insane even thinking about it, actually. He wondered if Gale felt the same way. He hoped he did.

No matter how many shady deals John barely got out of, how many drinks he downed, how many fights he got into, he knew: he would always return to this bar in the hopes he got to see Gale fucking Clevon.

He texted Gale after he had gotten home; told him he had a fun night. John didn't really expect an answer until the next morning, but he got a text back almost immediately. It read:

I did too.

John slept soundly that night. If you had asked him two days ago to name a person he would be willing to die for, John wouldn't have been able to give you an answer. If you asked him now, mind fuzzy and heart beating steadily, he would know who to name within the blink of an eye. It was reckless, John knew that.

But who was he, if not reckless?

Chapter 3

John Egan had known Gale Clevon for four weeks now. Four weeks of frequent meetings at a bar he so loved, for weeks of mindlessly chatting about, four weeks of John going on and on about baseball, four weeks of feeling as though there was something missing.

Four weeks of John not being able to think about anything else but Gale Clevon.

Now, John knew dangerous people and he knew how to avoid them. But apparently, the most dangerous of them all was a gorgeous blonde lawyer, soon to be married. Only issue was: John did not know how to avoid HIM.

So he didn't. Simple as that.

Instead, John was back at that damn bar, watching as Gale ordered another glass of water. It was Saturday, so there were a lot more people around than usual. As much as John liked the gloomy atmosphere and muted conversations on weekdays, he didn't mind a bit of a crowd from time to time. They sat with their backs to the counter, observing the other customers with keen interest, although John couldn't really keep his eyes from wandering off to his left, where Gale sat, every once in a while.

Robert was even playing music tonight. Some people were dancing, loud chatter rang in John's ears. There was a nice ambience to it all. He never really liked those techno parties downtown where all the younger folk went; he thought they were way too expensive. Besides, why spend his nights in an overcrowded nightclub with straining disco lights ruining his eyesight, when he could have an old-timey bar with familiar faces and 50s to 80s music accompanying the dancing of a few couples.

John liked dancing, too. Not as much as he liked singing, but he was starting to feel his feet tingle. There was nothing more he wanted to do but get up and moving. He had half a mind to grab Gale's arm and tear him to the dancefloor. John assumed Gale wouldn't like that very much. So he stayed put, simply nodding his head to the rhythm of

whatever song was playing in the background.

John drank less, he had noticed. Well, it was only when Robert had made a comment about his change in drinking behaviour when the oddity of it all really struck him, but he had noticed nevertheless. He blamed it on Gale. Because when John drank, he forgot a lot of things. He didn't want to forget one second he spent with Gale. And maybe that was a good thing. Or maybe it was the beginning of his downfall, John couldn't really tell yet.

"I need a nickname for you," John announced. Gale turned his head, slowly, his eyebrows raised in confused amusement. He glanced over at Robert, who was busy with a few customers, before answering.

"Don't make me part of your nickname game, John," he warned, voice low, but with just enough charm that John was willing to drown in it.

He shrugged, played it off. "Well, in that case, it has to be perfect!"

Gale scoffed and chewed on his toothpick. He almost looked like a proper cowboy, the only thing missing being the hat. If you overlooked the fact that cowboys would not have worn suits to saloons. John grinned at him. "I'll find one, just you wait."

For a long moment, they enjoyed a comfortable silence. It was like that with them, for some reason. John couldn't really explain it. Whenever he was with Gale, he felt a sort of tranquillity, the calm before the storm. It riled him up just as much as it calmed him down. Fire and fuse, or something like that.

There was a pause in the music. Then, John's favourite oldie came on. And how could he not let out the biggest sigh of all time, his lips immediately curling into a huge smile? He hadn't heard that song in such a long time, so he was willing to enjoy it to its fullest. He clapped his hands on his thighs and turned towards Gale, who looked at him rather worried.

"I'm gonna sing," John explained, scrunching up his nose.

Gale shook his head slightly. "No."

John, throwing his hands up in fake offence, couldn't believe his ears. "You haven't even heard me sing! How would you-"

"It's gonna be bad," Gale cut him off. He had to know that nothing would be able to talk John out of performing a round of karaoke in a full bar at this point. He had to. This was 'Blue Skies' by Frank Sinatra after all!

So John jumped from his seat, ignored the warning look he got from Robert, finished his drink and started trailing towards an open spot in the crowd.

He held Gale's gaze, walking backwards. Gale smiled at him in defeat.

And the word slipped his tongue so easily.

"It's my song, Buck!"

Gale's eyes widened with recognition and John felt his mind go fuzzy. There was something so intimate about the name that made John's hair stand. Yet, it came so freely to him, as if he had said it many, many times before. John was sure that he hadn't. There was something else in Gale's surprised stare that John couldn't read, as it was gone as soon as it had come.

The world was still turning however, and John remembered where he was. Right. Room full of people, his song playing, about to perform a one man show. He had to get his head back in the game. Maybe the years of drinking had finally gotten to him. Yep, it definitely was a good thing to be laying off the alcohol.

John shook his head, closed his eyes for a moment and then did what he did best. He made the people smile. More importantly, he made Buck -Gale, he reminded himself- smile. When John glanced over at him, he was grinning from ear to ear, pinching the bridge of his nose.

John decided it would be this scene that he would project onto his mind's eye and fall asleep to tonight. Gale Cleven, *Buck*, smiling.

Admittedly, it was a good nickname.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Warning for graphic depictions of violence and mentions of homophobia in this chapter!! Please don't read this one if you feel like that's not for you right now!

Also sorry for the long wait, I'm currently suffering from a huge writer's block :(

John was drinking again.

Mainly because Gale hadn't shown up tonight. But also because he couldn't bear having to listen to those damn Brits at the table behind him. The alcohol made it less of a chore on his ears. He tried to engage in a bit of light conversation with Robert, but to no avail. The distinct sound of prolonged vowels and missing t's always came back to him. It was very clich   of him, as an American, to hate on the British accent, but frankly, he couldn't care less.

So after a while of desperately trying to drown out the noise around him, John gave into the temptation and listened in on the men's talk.

There were three of them, seemingly in a good mood, and talking about nothing striking in particular, as was to be expected. Money, women, and tea. But there was something else that made John's ears perk. They were snickering and commenting about the table next to them. John scooted around on his chair to have a better overview of the situation, sipping on his whiskey. The men looked the way they spoke- filthy. Maybe a bit extreme, but John evaluated it to be the right word to use, considering how they were behaving. The table next to them seated two men, roughly around John's age, if not younger, laughing and talking in hushed voices. Their fingers were intertwined on top of the table, thumbs softly gliding over warm skin. John felt his cheeks grow red. Not only did he feel embarrassed by watching the intimacy of these two boys as closely as he did, but also because for a split second, he saw himself at that table, across from a certain blonde lawyer.

John shook his head to get rid of the thought. He had to focus. The British men's teasing got louder, insults and names being called out,

catching the attention of the lovers (John was sure of it). There was a moment of awkward silence as the men looked at each other, nodding, and then got up to leave. John felt a surge of blind rage race through his body. How was it possible that homosexual people couldn't even enjoy an evening in a bar in peace? It was the 21st century, after all!

One of the Brits pushed himself up from the table, clearly swaying from having too much to drink. John instinctively got up as well. Then, they all stared at one another. The two men, their jackets in hand, fear clearly visible in their eyes, the Brit and his friends, aggression in their stance, and John, who felt as though he was going to burst open from the inside. He gave the men a slow nod and they rushed to the door, leaving the tense situation and their inevitable fate behind.

"What do you think you're doin'?", the Brit grunted, his words slurred. His friends now stood up behind him, closing in on John. Three against one wasn't necessarily a fair fight, but John didn't count them as full people. All of them were drunker than he was, and they probably never had to deal with an angry drug boss and his goons. John was experienced, he could take them. You're not supposed to fight with anger, but John had no other emotion left for homophobic assholes.

John pretended to think. "Looking for trouble?" It was more of a statement than a question, really. They got closer, within arms reach of him, reeking of liquor and smoke. John knew he had a similar smell on him. Fighting fire with fire, it seemed.

"Listen here you little-"

Robert cut the man off. "No fighting in my bar. Take it outside, boys!"

The Brits looked at one another, then proceeded to well- 'take it outside' after glaring at John. Robert shot him a warning glance. "Egan-"

He clenched his teeth together. There was no way he was going to pass up this chance of showing this scum where their place was. No one in here was allowed to disrespect people for simply loving when he was around. No one. Gale's smile flashed in his mind for a moment.

"I got it Rosie," he grinned, always keeping up his facade. John was

sure Robert had seen the furious glint in his eyes.

The cool night air was like a slap in the face. Or maybe it was the dread of what was about to actually hit him. Still, John kept his balance as he spotted the group of men in the alley behind the bar, already getting rid of their jackets. John wasn't about to drop his shiny leather jacket to the dirty ground; he had just gotten it after all. Gale had not been very fond of his old one. He walked towards the men, breathing in the fresh breeze to ground himself. His bones were still aching from the running he had to do yesterday when the cops had suddenly showed up at a handover site. Safe to say he wasn't really fit for a fight right now. Well, no going back at this point.

"Gentlemen," he greeted them mockingly. The alley was shredded in darkness, the only light coming from a lowly glowing street lamp at the far end. John's muscles tensed as shadows contorted his opponent's faces. How did he end up here again?

The leader of the group smirked at him. "You're a tough one, huh?"

John bit back a sarcastic laugh. "You could say tha-

The sudden hit to his stomach punched all of the air out of his lungs, his eyes widening in sudden realisation. He saw the second fist coming, but was unable to dodge completely due to the loss of breath, feeling the glancing blow at his ribs that sent a jolt of pain through his side. He grunted, backing up just in time to avoid a third punch from the leading man, slowly coming to regret his choices. All of his choices, in fact. Pride goeth before the fall.

One of the men rushed him from behind, slamming a fist into John's kidney. The pain was sharp and immediate, nearly dropping him to his knees. But John gritted his teeth and swung around, delivering a swift elbow to the bearded man's jaw, sending him staggering back. Right, he could still let his anger out on these bastards.

John knew he had to keep moving. He ducked under another swing

from the leader and countered with a solid right hook to the man's jaw. The leader stumbled but didn't go down. Tough fucker. One of the others took advantage of John's momentary distraction, landing a hard kick to his thigh. The impact made John wince, his leg threatening to give out, but he forced himself to stay upright. He would (could) not go down like this.

A swift fist to his nose, which made an awful cracking noise, brought him back to reality. Panting heavily, he brought a hand to the painful warmth there, his fingers coming away wet and coated in a dark red. Great. As if his nose wasn't already crooked enough. Would Gale still want to see him, all beaten up and bloodied as he was? Would he find it vile? Would he contort his pretty features to a face of disgust? John felt a wave of shame was over him, drowning out most of the pain.

There was a klick and John's ears perked up, recognition blinking in his eyes. He had heard that sound too many times to not know what it was. Who brought a knife to a fist fight? Everyone, apparently. Swiftly, he turned around to look at his impending doom. The leader was rushing towards him, glistening steel blade in his hands. Cruel laughter filled the air around John.

Was this it? Was this where he was going to die? In some filthy back-alley, stabbed to death by a bunch of tea-sipping Brits? No fucking way.

As the man closed the distance, John's mind raced. He sidestepped at the last second, grabbing the man's wrist and twisting it sharply. The knife wavered, and with a quick, forceful punch to the man's forearm, the blade clattered to the ground. The man growled in pain, eyes wide with shock. Not a good look on him, very revolting.

John didn't waste a second. He hooked his leg around the man's ankle, yanking it forward and sending him sprawling to the ground. He had wanted to try that move so many times, he almost started laughing. Before the leader could recover, John was on top of him, gripping his collar with one hand and raising a fist with the other.

John could feel the eyes of the other two men on him from behind, There was no sound; they weren't moving. John assumed they hadn't realised this would escalate as quickly as it did.

He could feel the adrenaline pumping through his veins, his knuckles aching from the repeated blows the men had delivered. This was the moment of triumph, the culmination of the fight, the final act of defiance. He brought his fist down. The man grunted in pain, coughing. A pathetic sound, really. John slammed his fist down again.

And again.

And again.

There was blood on knuckles, on his face, and on his jacket. On his jacket. The jacket Gale had recommended to him, the jacket Gale liked so much. Gale. Fuck.

Just as John was about to slam his fist into the man's cheek a fifth time, a bright light blinded him and his arm froze mid air. There was shuffling of feet behind John; the two other men choosing flight instead of fight. Cowards.

“Freeze! Put your hands where I can see them!”

John turned his head slowly, barely able to make out the silhouette of the policeman at the end of the alley. John was sure he had a gun raised, so he reluctantly put his hands behind his head and got up, every bone in his body aching and protesting. The man on the floor spluttered and coughed.

John didn't even register when the handcuffs were put around his wrists. He only noticed the cool iron soothing his joints. In a way, he was grateful for it.

He wondered if Gale would look for him when he didn't show up at the bar tomorrow evening. He hoped Gale would. It was the only thing keeping him sane, after all. Gale was keeping him sane, so when he wasn't there, things escalated. He would have killed that man.

There was a stabbing pain in John's heart that was certainly not

caused by the fight as John let himself be led to the police car. Blinking blue and red lights filled his vision and he thought about Gale.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

So uhhhh.... we're just going to ignore that I disappeared for over a year, right? RIGHT? Sorry about that. Lots going on in life right now, but I have started my rewatch of Masters of the Air and knew that I really wanted to continue this fic, so here we are. Random chapter to fill the void and get back into writing to finally fight the writer's block demons (I did write this in like 3 hours so we might be on track again, thank god).

Hopefully, I'm gonna update more regularly now, but no promises ;3

(not even sure if anyone still reads this, but if you do, I highly appreciate you <3)

Many thanks for reading,

-author

The holding cell was cold, it was gray, and it was dark. There was a horrible, surging pain pounding through John Egan's forehead as he sat on the hard wooden bench of the cell, back to the stone wall. His knees were pulled up, his hands dangling. In his mind, he couldn't form a single clear thought. Everything was muddled together, a whirlwind of decisions and missed opportunities.

It had been hours since they had locked him in here. He had given his statement, asked for a lawyer. Since then, he hadn't heard from anyone. The police, friend and helper. They hadn't even given him the medical attention he clearly needed. Not that he would request it of course, even if purely out of spite. The sharp pain every time he tried to breathe in made him slowly start to regret that choice. It must be past three already, he thought. Would he ever get out of this nasty cell? Maybe not. And maybe that was for the better. Then he wouldn't have to see Gale Cleven again, who was still the only person he could actually form an image of in his head right now. Mind you, John wasn't great when it came to remembering faces. But for some reason, his mind had no issue to remind him of that stupid, sparkling smile and those stupid, diamond eyes. Gale Cleven, the man, the myth.

Footsteps echoing down the hall tore John from his thoughts. He

hoped it was his lawyer, coming to tell him he was fucked. Or better yet, it was an executioner. Nah, times were too modern for that, to John's dismay. Because right now, he wanted to sink into the ground and never return. Maybe he could watch over Gale as his guardian angel and adore him from the skies above. Fuck that. John didn't even believe in God. The throbbing pain in his aching bones reminded him of the harsh reality.

The footsteps came to a halt in front of his cell; keys were rattling and the door swung open with a high-pitched screech, like nails on chalkboard. John grit his teeth together and looked up. It was one of the policemen he had noticed earlier. He was in the room when John had given his statement. The man looked young, a little naive maybe, but competent. He motioned John to stand up. Reluctantly, he did.

"I apologize for the long wait, Mr. Egan. Lots of paperwork to fill out." His voice was smooth and there was a sense of authority in his voice. The nametag on his uniform read 'Lt. Crosby'. It sounded familiar. "It turns out that one of the men you have..." he barely glanced at the blood splatters on his jacket, "...had an inconvenience with, has a very long criminal record. Reported many times for harassment, assault, theft..." Lt. Crosby trailed off. He took a good, long look at John before continuing. "I'm going to be honest, Mr. Egan. I don't want to see you out of this cell. Your name is not new to us either. But. You have been bailed out." The Lieutenant mustered him, a stern look on his face.

John's mind was racing once again. A thousand questions popped up; none of them he knew an answer to. So he just stood there, exhausted and (a very rare occasion in his life:) speechless. Lt. Crosby must have figured out John's confusion, or he could see it by the way his eyebrows were furrowed, because he started to lead John out of his cell, resuming his explanation.

"You've been given another chance at life, Mr. Egan. Don't take it for granted. I trust you understand the severity of the situation. If you don't turn your life around, I will see to it that you end up behind real bars." It was worded like a threat, but as John trailed behind the Lieutenant, he didn't really pick up on it. Either way, it's not like he cared. He just wanted to get out of here. He hated the pristine white and blue of the police station, the bright hallway lights hurting his

eyes. They had adjusted to the darkness in the cell, so the new brightness was unwelcome by his tired mind. He just wanted his bed. And sleep. And Gale. What.

They walked past a bunch of other policemen, some citizens who were filing reports, others who were in the waiting area. John didn't care for any of them. There was a lump forming in his throat and he felt like he had to throw up. They came to a stop near the front doors. Finally, John thought. Lt. Crosby cocked his head to his side and gave him a look he couldn't quite decipher. "You're free to leave, Mr. Egan. And I would advise you to find a shower as soon as possible. No offense." The Lieutenant smirked at him. John couldn't blame him for the snarky remark. He probably looked like he just crawled out of his own grave.

"None taken," John responded, his voice sounding strained and rough to his own ears after not talking for a long time. Like he had woken up from a deep sleep. He smiled back, weakly.

As Crosby turned to leave, John felt like there was one question he did need to ask. "Lieutenant," he stared, eyebrows raised, "who was it that bailed me out?" John waited eagerly for a response, which he never got. Just a small smile and a nod of his head towards the doors.

John stood there for a moment, utterly confused. He really needed that shower. And a tissue. He caught his reflection in the windows as he turned around and almost contorted his face. He looked as awful as he felt. With swift steps, he headed straight out of that damned station, leaving behind the cleanliness and smell of iron bars and returning to the cool night air, where the breeze gently caressed his face. God, that felt good.

But not as good as what came next.

Not even two seconds back into his freedom, he felt a familiar tingle flowing down his spine, a certain spark in his heart, making it beat faster. A familiar voice flowed into his ears. "John Egan," his name sounded so good when he said it, "your two o'clock."

Ignoring the way it made his head hurt, John spun around almost

instantly.

There he was, in all his glory. Gale Clevon, like a knight in shining armour, coming to save John from his tower of self-destruction. He just stood there, hands in his pockets, suit and tie neat as always, his hair tussled up slightly by the wind. There was a glint in his eyes, worry mixed with relief and something else. That little something that John could never quite understand, but he knew it was there. And tonight, it was brighter than ever.

“You could have come to my rescue sooner.” John smiled widely, stepping closer to Gale, looking down at him. He had never really noticed that even though they were both tall, John still had a few inches on the blonde. He would be lying if he said he didn’t like that.

Gale raised an eyebrow in response. There was a hint of a smirk tugging at his lips. “I came as soon as I heard.” That soothing voice made John shake his head.

“Not soon enough,” he continued his little teasing. Of course he would say his eternal thank yous once he was done with it, though. He was more than grateful, and he would make sure to show that to Gale in every way that he could. For now, that was by being himself.

Gale’s smirk now fully broke free. John couldn’t help but glance at his lips. He wondered how they would feel against his own. “Never soon enough with you.”

“Never enough of you, Buck,” John breathed, the words slipping out, rushed, hurried. His hands clenched at his side as not to reach out and do something he would later on regret. He did that so often after all. He had already done it once tonight. He wouldn’t repeat it.

John could hear Gale inhale sharply. It made his heart pang with guilt. Maybe he shouldn’t have said that. They had been treading the line so carefully since they had met. Even though John had wanted to

overstep it many times already, the thought of Gale in a white suit, his beautiful wife by his side, had stopped him.

John had opened his mouth as if to say something, but Gale didn't let him. Instead, Gale Cleven embraced him, wrapping his arms tightly around his neck, pulling him close. John allowed himself to hesitantly return the hug, hands sneaking around a strong back, resting his forehead against Gale's shoulder. The sudden closeness made John's entire body prickle with electricity, the feeling so intense he thought he might see stars. They fit together like pieces of a puzzle and for some reason, John didn't think that this was their first hug. He could hear Gale's equally fast heartbeat against his own, and for a moment, nothing else mattered.

Not the red stains on his jacket; not the bruises John was sure were forming near his ribs; not the lingering stares of late passer bys; not the buzzing of a phone in Gale's pocket; no the fact that Gale had a fiancée and John was way too close for his own sanity. It didn't matter, not right now.

They stayed like that for what felt like hours and John wished to never let go again.

John walked alongside Gale, his phone clutched in his left hand, the hand that didn't have bruised knuckles. Apparently, Gale had showed up at the bar not long after John's arrest and Robert had given him John's phone, explaining what had taken place. John now felt embarrassed by his recklessness, the stupidity of even leaving his phone on the counter. Had he really been that blinded by anger? Robert had now been trying to call John for the past ten minutes, but he decided he would deal with that later. He didn't want to be scolded any more tonight. The stay at the police station had already humbled him enough. He shot Rosie a quick text that he was fine, that he was with Gale (so, actually more than fine).

Also for the past ten minutes, John had profusely thanked Gale for bailing him out, who had dismissed it and said it was nothing. So now, they were both left in their usual comfortable silence. John wasn't even sure where they were going, he simply trailed alongside his friend like a lost puppy.

Only did he start to notice where they might be headed to when the houses along the sidewalk grew larger, the windows looked much cleaner, and the lanterns became more frequent, showing off nicely kept front gardens with neat pathways leading to inornate front doors. This was nothing like John's end of town, where his apartment lay between blocks of concrete, that more resembled factories than housing opportunities, and rusted staircases with graffiti sprayed on the railings. Not that he ever complained about his place of residence, but this was something different.

Gale stopped in front of a high building with many windows, pulling a set of keys from his pocket. He gestured for John to follow him. He hesitated.

"Buck, as charming as it is that you want to show me your place, I don't think it's a good idea," John warned, motioning towards his appearance and his face, traces of the fight still clearly visible. He didn't mention the fact that he was nervous simply because he had never been alone with Gale in a room before. Not that he hadn't thought of it. On the contrary, he had even dreamed of it. But this was different.

Gale shrugged. "No one is going to see you, John. Besides, you don't look that terrible."

John felt his heart skip a bit and immediately followed behind Gale as he unlocked the front door. "Was that a compliment I heard just now?"

"Don't get too cocky."

"Me? Never." John smiled as they stepped into the elevator.

For the first time in forever, John Egan felt as though he could rely on someone other than himself. As though he could trust Gale Clevon with his life. Maybe he had already done that before they had even met. John was enamoured by him, and every minute more they spent together he could feel something deep inside of him stir.

It felt unreal as he stood in the elevator behind Gale, hands in his pockets, trying to keep them from grasping the blonde hair and pushing him against the wall to kiss him until they were both breathless.

But John knew better. Gale was simply look, don't touch. And John would keep it that way. He would not destroy that connection that he was sure they had. Not again.

Chapter 6

The apartment was quiet and it was clean. So much cleaner than what John had imagined it to be. So clean that when Gale made him sit down on the couch (even though John told him it wouldn't be necessary and he could just take a chair instead) he felt like he was dirtying it by simply touching it. This place was not made for people like him. Still, he felt more comfortable here than he had ever felt in his own skin. John had asked Gale to not turn on the big living room lights, as the brightness of them had reminded him of the police station. So instead, the light that now illuminated Gale's handsome features came from a small lamp near the couch, coating everything in a warm orange. John couldn't help but stare.

Gale scanned his face with a worried gaze, his fingers twitching at his side. He was sitting across from John on the edge of the coffee table, their knees almost touching. It looked like he wanted to reach out and touch John, but couldn't bring himself to. John scratched the thought, already grieving the imaginary feel of Gale's fingertips, and focused on his breathing instead.

It still hurt, but he knew the bruises were already starting to turn purple and would soon only be tiny red spots on the skin just below his ribs. He wondered if he'd at least managed to scratch off the dried blood from his nose. He hoped he had, because this was certainly not the state to end up on your best friend's couch, who, mind you, looked spotless.

Minutes of comfortable silence passed before Gale finally spoke again.

"You should really get this checked out," he murmured, pointing slightly at John's nose.

John sniffled. "At a hospital? Nah, thanks. Hate those just as much as police stations."

"Why?"

"Too bright. Too many people in uniforms. Locked away." From you.

"Then let me check it out. Just to make sure nothing's amiss." Gale frowned, already getting up from where he was sitting. John held up

his hands in mock defeat and sighed. Gale could do whatever he wanted if it meant John got to feel the warm buzz of his touch meeting his skin. "Sure. You win."

When Gale turned his back on him, John took this as his chance to take in more of his surroundings. The walls were painted a cold white, a few paintings that looked expensive filling them in even intervals from each other. The TV was a big, flat void of darkness, the plant next to it flanking it with its big leaves. Everything looked neat and organized, the blankets on the couch folded together in a perfect square, not one pillow was awry. Gale had disappeared into what John assumed to be the bathroom, light streaming through the doorway and into the hall where they had come through earlier. Gale's long coat was draped over one of the barstools in the kitchen; John was still wearing his leather jacket, still dirty and reeking of long nights and thrown punches. John was starting to feel hot despite the chilliness in the apartment, the urge to shrug off the leather growing with each strained breath. But he felt like he would infect Gale's home with his filth, so he didn't.

Gale returned from the bathroom with tissues and some sort of spray in his hands. He put them down on his lap when he sat back down, this time next to John on the couch, pulling up one of his legs so he could face him properly. "Take off your jacket," Gale instructed with a slight flick of his wrist as he turned his attention towards the tissues and the spray.

John hesitated. He shifted in his seat and cleared his throat.

"I wouldn't want it to ruin your-"

Gale's eyes shot back up to him, concern mirrored in an ocean of icy blue. He shook his head gently and reached out his hand. "You wouldn't ruin anything, John. Please."

The sincerity of his words made John relax a little more into the cushions as he wiggled free of his leathery constraints. He handed it to Gale, still a little unsure. Was Gale planning on letting him stay here for the night?

"You know this isn't how I imagined getting undressed on your couch, Buck." John bit his tongue as soon as the words left his mouth. Oh my

god. *Just why* would he say that? There was a line that John had told himself not to cross, and this was definitely crossing it.

To his surprise, Gale just smirked up at him and sprayed one of the tissues with the liquid. The strong smell of pure alcohol made its way through his nose and John finally figured it was disinfectant. Gale shifted even closer to him, their legs now touching and reached out to lift John's sweater to reveal his bruised sides. His fingertips stopped at the hem and he looked up, pausing.

"Can I?," he asked, carefully, his voice like soft velvet.

John could only nod. Words had failed him.

When Gale lifted the fabric and John's skin was exposed to the cool apartment air, he looked down to discover blue and purple bruises blooming all along his right flank. Gale sucked in a sharp breath and tentatively brushed his fingers along the blemishes. The pain his touch inflicted was overshadowed by the intense prickling sensation that made John's face heat up. John never wanted it to stop. John never wanted *Gale* to stop.

"Does this hurt?"

"Only a little bit." Don't pull away.

Gale kept his hand there, letting his palm rest lightly on John's skin, and brought his other hand upwards to clean the few scrapes there with the tissue. This stung a bit, so John grit his teeth together and closed his eyes. The stinging subsided after a few seconds and he could feel the buzz of Gale's touch promptly stop as his sweater was pulled down again. John didn't dare to open his eyes, afraid of what he would do if he opened them again after feeling Gale's hands on him like this. So gentle, so careful not to hurt him. As if he was made out of glass that could break anytime. But if John was made out of glass, he had broken a long time ago. He didn't want to cut Gale with his sharp edges.

"John."

There was a soft hand on his cheek, a thumb slowly brushing along his cheekbone.

“John, are you okay?”

“M fine,” he managed to get out. His nails dug into the skin of his palms, holding himself back. Not crossing the line any further than he had already done.

“Look at me.”

John’s eyes flew open and met Gale’s piercing gaze, staring at him with such warmth and genuine respect that John couldn’t help but shiver. He silently cursed himself for being so touchstarved. There was no one in the whole world except for the two of them. John Egan and Gale Cleven. John felt a sudden coldness overcome him, like snow in his hair and wind blowing through his clothes. Images flashed through his mind, memories of things that never happened. Whispered promises and the feeling of free falling through cloud scattered skies. Soaring heights and muddied holes.

John flinched back, eyes blown wide. Gale looked equally as surprised, his hand frozen mid-air, shaking slightly. John wanted nothing more than to take it into his own and kiss it until it was steady again. Instead, he looked down, ruffled his hair, got up, and pointed to the door with his thumb, unsure. “I...I think I should go,” John stammered, his usual resolve blown to pieces by their momentary connection. Gale said nothing, still staring at his hand and where John had sat just seconds ago.

“Thank you for the- the treatment,” John awkwardly pointed to his side, “I’ll be on my way then.” Why did he feel so tense all of a sudden? And why was he so dizzy? He started backing away from the light of the lamp and into the dark hall, towards the door. His jacket was still lying behind Gale on the couch, untouched.

John was about to turn his back to whatever this was, turn the sparkling doorhandle and leave this place, never to return. Hell, maybe he would even move away, to a different state altogether. But he didn’t.

Because Gale was suddenly up and walking towards him, long strides covering the distance in no time. He came to a stop inches away from

John's face. John held his breath.

"Stay," Gale breathed, voice low and hushed.

"Gale-"

Gale closed the distance between them in one fluid motion, their lips crashing together, fitting like pieces of a puzzle. John's vision started blurring and before he knew it, he was returning the kiss with such passion, he didn't know where he ended and where Gale began. Fuck the line. This was heaven. John's hands rested on Gale's waist, gripping it tightly, while Gale started playing with the hair at the back of John's neck, tugging lightly. Gale's lips were just as soft as he had imagined and as he drew his tongue along Gale's bottom lip he could swear he tasted citrus.

They were anything but careful now- hungry, searching. In an attempt to wake himself up in the wicked case that this was a dream, John murmured his name against his lips and Gale's laugh came out low, breathless. No, this was real. And John was making damned sure he saved every noise Gale made in the back of his head so he could replay them when this was over.

Their kisses only grew more impatient as they moved, stumbling down the hallway, still tangled together, shoulder and hips bumping against walls. Not that John cared. The living room welcomed them with its warm light and Gale tugged John down with him, landing them both on the soft cushion of the couch. His soft touches from earlier seemed ages away. Now his hands were roaming and gripping, over his shoulders, down his back, along ribs. As if they couldn't decide on where to land, only that they had to keep touching.

When John finally pulled away to catch his breath, their foreheads pressed together, Gale's lips were red and swollen and his eyes glistened. His hand had stopped at his chest, surely feeling John's heart beat faster than usual. John placed a soft kiss on the side of Gale's jaw and tugged gently on one of his golden locks, curling it around his fingers. He was propped up on top of Gale, knees straddling him, locking him in place.

When he went in for another kiss, Gale turned his head to the side, a blush creeping up on his cheeks. His hands were fisted in his shirt.

“John- we-,” he whispered, “we shouldn’t.”

And just like that, John was snapped out of his trance. The line was back, only this time far, far behind him. But it was back and John had crossed it and now there was no coming back from this. Ever.

He looked away, ashamed. A framed picture of Marge stared back at him, a wide smile on her perfect face. Mocking him.

Beneath him, Gale started sitting up, hesitantly touching his arm. John almost startled at the feeling, burning up once again. He pinched the bridge of his nose with his index and thumb. None of this made sense. He was angry, he was disappointed, he was confused. But worst of all, he wanted to do it all over again, even when he knew it was bad. Even when he knew it could never *be* something.

Gale kissed his forehead. “I’m so sorry.” His voice broke.

John breathed out. It was all over now anyway, so he could allow himself one last thing.

“Let me stay with you tonight. Please.”

“Just for tonight?”

“Just for tonight.”

So when Gale led him to the bedroom, he forgot about how he would feel as soon as morning came. He forgot about the bruises on his sides and the pounding in his head. He forgot about the ring on Gale’s finger and the woman in the pictures on his bedside table.

When their legs tangled like the roots of a tree and golden hair flowed over the mattress like waves of the ocean, John let go. When their lips

met in feverish heat and nails raked down his back, John could breathe. When Gale whispered his name into his ear like it didn't drive him insane, John surrendered.

He would remember in the morning. That was punishment enough.

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